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Religious Convictions and Moral Motivation

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Abstract

Adherence to certain religious beliefs is often cited as both an efficient deterrent to immoral behavior and as an effective trigger of the morally praiseworthy actions. I assume the truth of the externalist theory of motivation, emphasizing emotions as the most important non-cognitive elements that causally contribute to behavioral choices. While religious convictions may foster an array of complex emotions in a believer, three emotive states are singled out for a closer analysis: fear, guilt and gratitude. The results of recent empirical studies are examined to evaluate the relative motivational efficiency of all three emotions, as well as the likely negative psychological side-effects of these affective states, such as aggression and depression. While an action motivated by fear of punishment can be seen as a merely prudential strategy, the reparatory incentive of a guilty subject and a desire to reciprocate of the one blessed by undeserved favors are more plausible candidates for the class of genuine moral reactions. The available evidence, however, does not warrant a conclusion that a sense of guilt before God or as a sense of gratefulness to God, may produce a statistically significant increase in the frequency of prosocial actions aimed at other humans.

1. Introduction

Let us refer to a view that morality and religion are intertwined in manner that is not merely accidental as a Theory of Religious Dependence. Since it is uncommon to claim that religion depends on morality, in what follows I will assume that an advocate of this theory affirms the opposite dependence. Yet, a person stating that morality depends on religion can be plausibly interpreted as accepting several distinct claims. First, he might be interpreted as claiming that religion is the main source of moral knowledge. One might argue that without a religious tradition, religious books or the pronouncements of the religiously-gifted people, we would remain ignorant as to what constitutes the proper set of moral rules and moral values, or which character traits a person ought to develop and which he or she should avoid. According to this view, religion contributes to morality in a straightforward, instrumental manner – it becomes a kind of an indispensable manual which contains a list of do's and don'ts. In other words, it supplies us with unique (and, we might assume, infallible) knowledge of what is right and what is wrong – the information that we, presumably, would not be able to extract from any other 'natural' source. Let us refer to this interpretation as the claim of the *epistemological* dependence of morality on religion.

Secondly, a more sophisticated (and more radical) version of the Theory of Religious Dependence argues that the core moral notions of rightness and wrongness should be defined in terms of the divine properties, such as God's approval or disapproval of certain actions or types of actions. What makes an action morally wrong, on this reading, is the fact of God's explicit dislike of this type of behavior and no other natural or supernatural feature of the action, such as its consequences or the agent's motivation, matter for the ultimate moral judgment. This view often goes under the name of the Divine Command Theory. We may also call this kind of

understanding of how morality depends on religion as a claim to the *semantic or ontological* dependence of moral concepts on divine properties.[1]

Finally, one might bring up religion in the context of the discussion of the behavioral efficaciousness of moral rules and the problem of moral motivation. Admittedly, knowing what the correct moral rules are, and having a sufficient incentive for following them despite the opposing desires, indicates two different levels of moral maturity. Many religious traditions seek to help hesitant moral agents by supplying them with an appropriate story of an ever-present Divine Observer or an implacable Cosmic Force, which duly records both moral failings and moral triumphs, and dispenses rewards accordingly. It is common, therefore, to encounter an argument suggesting that without the background religious beliefs in rewards and punishments, one would have no sufficient motivation for obeying the rules, especially in those cases when one might benefit from breaking a rule and, moreover, is able to do so with impunity from any worldly authorities. Let us refer to this view as the alleged *psychological* dependence of moral action on religious beliefs. A defender of the Theory of Religious Dependence might consistently embrace it either in the form of the epistemological, psychological or ontological variety, or else claim to adhere to two or all three versions at the same time. In what follows I will only focus on the question whether there are good reasons to believe that holding certain religious beliefs contributes to a morally praiseworthy behavior in a statistically significant manner.

By necessity, many highly controversial questions about the nature of morality and religion will have to be bypassed in what follows, and several crucial metaethical assumptions will be assumed without elaboration. First, I take it for granted for the purposes of this discussion that the moral point of view denotes a distinct way of dealing with the world, which cannot be

[1] Not many modern philosophers are willing to explicitly advocate the truth of the Divine Command Theory, but Philip Quinn (1978) makes a strong case to show the theory is at least conceptually coherent. Although he stops short of endorsing the view himself, he seeks to demonstrate that, at least in principle, a certain version of the Divine Command Theory may withstand the most rigorous philosophical criticism.

fully reduced to any non-moral interest. Secondly, at the bare minimum, for any rational agent, acting morally implies acting out of a concern for the well-being of other humans and not merely for the sake of the agent's own benefit. Thirdly, a set of foundational universal moral norms can be discovered and rationally justified by humans.[2] Finally, by a 'religion' I shall mean any spiritual practice that falls roughly within the scope of the Judeo-Christian tradition, or one that is sufficiently similar to this paradigmatic tradition in its ethical code.[3]

2. Emotions and Moral Motivation

As a prerequisite, it will first be necessary to outline a plausible theory of motivation before discussing the supposed influence of religious beliefs on moral behavior. The word 'outline' is important, since a thorough defense of a particular theory of motivation would call for a separate major research project. However, it will suffice for our limited purposes merely to highlight the main features of such a theory with the understanding that the view outlined below, albeit plausible, is far from being a universally accepted position. In what follows, I will assume that the so-called *externalist* theory of motivation is highly likely to be correct, for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Externalists typically follow David Hume in arguing for the 'division of labor' between beliefs or cognitive states, which are states representing the way the world is, and the conative states (e.g., desires or emotive reactions) which alone can bring about an intentional action. The externalists hold that mere beliefs about morality, no matter how sincerely held, are motivationally inert (precisely because they are *beliefs*), and an independent affective attitude is needed to entail the typical practical consequences of an earnest moral judgment.[4] The available evidence in favor of an externalist theory of motivation is rather

[2] I refer the reader to my earlier article (Zavaliy 2012b) for a more detailed defense and elaboration of these three assumptions.
[3] This definitional restriction is necessary to exclude from consideration various idiosyncratic religious traditions, such as the ones that would demand human sacrifices or vendetta as moral obligations for all followers.
[4] In contrast, the *internalists*, following Kantian intuitions, argue either that being motivated to act upon a moral belief is part of the very meaning of 'accepting a belief,' or that having the appropriate belief is causally or conceptually connected with the corresponding desire to act upon it (Smith 1994).

impressive and any attempt to argue for the motivational efficacy of the pure cognitive states (e.g., a moral judgment of the form "X is wrong") runs into a considerable amount of counterarguments drawn from both the philosophical and the empirical research on motivation, including the impressive research done on psychopathology.[5]

If externalism with regard to motivation is true, it follows that certain non-cognitive states causally contribute to human behavior as the essential triggers of action, including the morally relevant action. But what exactly are these non-cognitive states? The two obvious candidates are emotions and desires. Emotions are distinct from desires, although it is plausible to suggest that emotions often generate corresponding desires. A feeling of fear typically generates a desire not to be in the presence of a fear-producing object, anger produces a desire to hurt or to remedy an injustice observed, and a feeling of joy and happiness may be correlated with a desire to prolong the moment (among others). The more complex emotions, such as guilt and shame, may also be correlated with a variety of desires (however unrealistic these desires might be) aimed at reducing or eliminating the circumstances that produce these unpleasant affective reactions. At the same time, one may apparently have a standing desire (e.g., a desire to change the tires on a car next month) which is not necessarily colored by any noticeable emotional attendants. The desire-producing emotions are thus in an important sense more fundamental and more efficacious when it comes to behavioral motivation[6] As argued by a number of researchers, the role of emotions (the so-called 'moral emotions') is especially pertinent in producing a morally relevant action and it is thus emotions that should be considered as the prime candidates for the triggers of pro-social behavior.[7]

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[5] See (Zangwill 2007), (Roskies 2008), (Kiehl 2008), (Schroeder et al. 2010) and (Zavaliy 2012a).

[6] Frijda and Zellenberg (2001) convincingly showed that emotions have intimate links with actions, and Schroeder (2004) explored the conceptual connection between desires and emotions.

[7] Evans, among others, is rather straightforward, when he asserts: "Emotions seem to underlie much, if not all, of our moral behavior. Without them, we would not be capable of virtue" (2001, 64). See also (Prinz and Nichols 2010) for a similar conclusion.

Next, our emotions do not appear in a random sequence; instead, they are relatively predictable affective reactions to the objects, persons or states of affairs cognitively presented in evaluative terms. The cognitive element in emotions may be barely discernible (as is usually the case with the basic 'instinctive' emotive reactions such as fear or disgust), or much more extensive with the more complex emotive states (such as shame, guilt, gratitude) but it is clearly present to some degree on all levels.[8] The way we perceive the world, what beliefs we hold about it, and what expectations we harbor about a given situation will determine the kind of emotive reaction we might develop. A belief that the situation is self-degrading will normally trigger an emotive response of shame and a desire to hide from view, while a belief that the animal in front of me is extremely harmful will characteristically stimulate fear, along with a corresponding desire to avoid the danger. In both cases, a particular evaluative belief, attended by an affective reaction of a required intensity, should be sufficient to motivate actions.

The theory of motivation outlined above, however crude and incomplete, provides the basic theoretical framework for the discussion of the religiously motivated moral behavior. If an emotive component is a *sine qua non* of moral behavior, we may reasonably ask which emotions are in play when it comes to the behavior of an agent who sincerely adheres to a certain religious worldview. At least three candidates immediately present themselves: fear, guilt and gratitude.[9] In what follows, I will offer a brief discussion of each of these, commenting on their respective efficiency as moral motivators and the appropriateness of each of these emotive states as the mental triggers for a virtuous choice.

3. Fear and Morality

Arguably, of the three emotions cited above, fear is the most common mention when a discussion turns to an alleged connection between religious beliefs and morality. The implied

[8] See, for example, (Solomon 1977) and (Scherer 1984).
[9] These do not exhaust all the possibilities. In addition, shame, love and joy can also be listed as emotive states correlated with religious convictions, but I will not be concerned with them in this paper.

connection between fear and a desirable behavior is also the easiest one to comprehend, and it is safe to affirm that this connection often enjoys the status of a self-evident assumption in a wide circle of people. Many of us can personally relate to cases when the threat of a traffic ticket curbed our desire to put our foot down on the accelerator and arrive home a bit faster than usual. Fear of punishment often effectively neutralizes any expected positive emotive reaction, such as a thrill from a fast ride or a joy of an early dinner. At the same time, getting an insider's information about the exact location of speed cameras, and thus knowing that the road ahead is free from any police supervision, may remove the essential psychological barrier that previously stopped one from speeding. The arguer may further generalize from these ordinary cases in the following manner: if a threat of a relatively mild punishment may produce these visible (and positive) changes in drivers' behavior, how much more effective should a belief in the existence of an omniscient God be, given that the divine punishment is incomparably harsher and more certain than any of the earthly sanctions.

One of the characters in Dostoyevsky's novel "The Brothers Karamazov" famously exclaimed at one point: "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted." Whatever else this often-quoted phrase implies, at the very least it suggests that a Christian idea of God, with all the accompanying beliefs in divine rewards and retributions, is an necessary protection in the face of the ever-present threat of social chaos and amorality, while the removal of this religious barrier would immediately activate a slippery-slope reaction with disastrous results.[10] On a familiar popular interpretation, God (or a fitting supernatural substitute) is needed for a moral life as an omniscient and omnipresent policeman, who constantly watches over humans, and thus functions as an effective deterrent to moral transgressions. A sincere belief in the existence of such a being would normally imply the belief that, in the long run, one cannot escape the

[10] The Gallup poll, done in the USA, reports "Lack of faith or religion" as the second most commonly cited reason for the decline of morals in the country, beaten only by the answer "Lack of compassion and respect for others." (https://news.gallup.com/poll/1681/moral-issues.aspx).

consequences of one's actions even if all the earthly authorities would prove to be useless in punishing (or rewarding, as the case might be) the given behavior.

Invoking God and an afterlife as an incentive for moral life is a strategy not limited to a Judeo-Christian civilization but seems to have been present in many cultures since the earliest age. Fearing God's wrath is clearly among the main reasons for obedience to God for the Israelites. The Old Testament is replete with references to "the fear of the Lord" and such an attitude is frequently correlated both with the fulfillment of God's commandments and the acquisition of the highest form of wisdom.[11] The apparent effectiveness of the religious incentive would naturally suggest a pedagogical strategy of continuing to inculcate certain convictions in the younger generation, even when the metaphysical basis for these beliefs might be weakened. Thus, the seventeenth century Chinese novelist Li Yu, in his novel "The Carnal Prayer Mat", related a conversation between a Buddhist monk and a young skeptical intellectual, who had expressed doubts in the truth and usefulness of religion. At one point, the Buddhist monk, failing to convince the young man of the truth of the *Dharma* by means of a logical argument, appealed to a purely pragmatic justification of religion:

> You, intellectuals, can avoid [religious beliefs] in every sphere of life save that of personal morality. Disregard for the moment the irrefutable evidence for the existence of Heaven and Hell. Even if Heaven did not exist, we should still need the concept of Heaven as inducement to virtue. Similarly, even if Hell did not exist, we should still need the concept of Hell as a deterrent to vice (Yu 1996, 50).

The appeal to a looming postmortem retribution for one's immoral acts as a legitimate deterrent is less common among modern moralists. The practice of citing fear as a reason for a

[11] See, for instance, Deuteronomy 5:29; Psalms 111:1; 111:10; Proverbs 9:10; 15:33.

moral action is especially disdained by those impressed by the Kantian approach to morality, but such an appeal can nonetheless still be encountered, at least among the staunch defenders of the theological foundations of ethics. Thus, Baggett and Walls openly acknowledge in their recent book the appropriateness of the approach defended by the Buddhist monk quoted above, despite the familiar Kantian counter-considerations:

> To the Kantian we concede some ground on this point; heaven and hell do, at some level, appeal to self-interest. However, not all self-interest is selfish, and proper self-interest is a legitimate part of genuine moral motivation…The doctrines of heaven and hell may well provide some hard and needed motivation to live the kind of moral life that makes best sense when understood within a larger context than this life alone. Religious conviction <u>can, should, and often does</u> contribute to a healthy sense of moral motivation (2011, 191-2).[12]

In the quoted passage, Baggett and Walls make three distinct affirmations about the connection between religious convictions and motivation. First, there is what I take to be a modal affirmation: a belief in postmortem punishment *can* motivate moral behavior. Secondly, there is a descriptive affirmation: religious conviction *often does* motivate human agents to act morally. Finally, there is a normative claim that religion *should* be invoked as an incentive for moral life. In what follows, I will argue that while the first modal affirmation may be readily accepted, there are good reasons for rejecting the last two claims.

It seems clear that there is nothing incoherent in a scenario where an agent abstains from a morally reprehensible behavior as a result of a strong conviction that this kind of action would incur divine wrath, whether in this life or in the life to come. Citing theft as an example, Bertrand Russell summarizes this line of reasoning as follows: "Criminals are not always caught, and the

[12] My emphasis. The religious apologists Baron and Haderlie make a similar point: "The individual with a belief in a higher entity, or force, will have a certain anxiety which will impel him or her to act morally. The sterile nature of philosophical ethics lacks this important facet of moral motivation" (2011, 72).

police may be unduly lenient to the powerful. But if people can be persuaded that there is a God who will punish theft, it would seem likely that this belief would promote honesty" (1971, 161). To be sure, the efficiency of fear as a behavioral motivator in each case depends on the strength of one's convictions that the threat in question is real enough. But, as William James demonstrated long ago, for a sincere believer the unseen objects of his or her belief (e.g., heaven or hell) may often acquire the qualities of a "quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended" and, in that sense, these transcendental objects of faith may function no less efficiently as incentives for action than a figure of a directly perceived robber with a gun in his hand (James 1928, 60-75).

Even so, there is a large gap between the acknowledgement that a religiously inspired fear *may* potentially function as a deterrent, and the affirmation that it does function in this capacity for most believers. James himself admitted that this kind of imputed realism of "the Unseen" may be possible for relatively few religiously gifted individuals, the mystics, but it is hardly a common feature of the average churchgoer. Russell, in addition, observes that the religion-driven behavioral dispositions typically lose their strength as a society advances to a higher level of development. While admitting that the fear of divine punishment might have been effective in reducing instances of anti-social behavior among the "semi-civilized communities," he continues:

> As civilization progresses, the earthly sanctions become more secure and the divine sanctions less so… Even highly religious people in the present day hardly expect to go to Hell for stealing. They reflect that they can repent in time, and that in any case Hell is neither so certain nor so hot as it used to be (1971, 161).[13]

[13] Unexpectedly, Russell still insists that it is fear that remains the primary deterrent for most people: "Most people in civilized communities do not steal, and I think the usual motive is the great likelihood of punishment here on earth" (*Ibid.*, 162).

Given that the threat of retribution in the afterlife is based on a rather conjectural and hypothetical scenario, with no direct way of confirming or refuting it, it should come as no surprise that Russell's quip about the gradual cooling of hell also receives an empirical endorsement. While, for obvious reasons, there are no reliable statistics about immoral acts in general (such as dishonesty, adultery and ungratefulness) committed respectively by believers and non-believers, we may invoke official criminal records as (at least) a mild confirmation of Russell's suggestion of the ever-weakening motivational force of religious beliefs.[14] The available data indicates that a high level of professed religiosity in a given society does not correlate with a decrease in violent crimes. Indeed, according to recent statistical reports, the murder rates are actually lower in more secular nations and higher in the more religious societies.[15] Some of the lowest crime rates in the world can be observed in Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Japan and New Zealand, that is, the countries that rank fairly high on the scale of secularization. In contrast, the highest crime rates are recorded in much more religious societies, such as Venezuela, Honduras and Afghanistan.[16] Likewise, the criminal statistics in the United States show comparable results – rates of the most violent crimes tend to be lower in the less religious, northern states and higher in the so-called Bible Belt regions.[17]

The statistical data on the correlation between the level of religiosity and the crime rate in a community should be evaluated in light of the recent empirical studies of the relative efficiency of the emotion of fear (be it fear of God's wrath or that of the more familiar forms of punishment) as a motivator of moral or, more generally, pro-social behavior. In their extensive research, spanning several European countries and covering both genders and various age-

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[14] The discussion below should by no means be taken as a conflation of the two domains of morality and law. Even so, however different these two domains are, there are clearly some significant overlaps. I take it for granted here that purposefully hurting, maiming or killing another human being is an offence against morality, just as it is an offence against the law.
[15] See (Jensen 2006) and (Paul 2005).
[16] See http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/crime-rate-by-country/
[17] (United States Census Bureau 2009). The highly religious state of Utah with an unusually low rate of criminal activity is a notable exception to the pattern.

groups, Gian Caprara and colleagues investigated whether fear of punishment can be reliably correlated with an increase in a socially desirable conduct. Contrary to the initial intuitions, it was discovered that fear of punishment is relatively unlikely to produce a socially approved behavior in most cases but, instead, is much more likely to contribute to a different and somewhat unexpected behavioral result, namely, increase in aggression. Summarizing the results of their experimental studies, Caprara writes:

> As punishment may serve both as an instigator and as a model of aggression, the more a person is punished and the more he/she worries about punishment, the more he/she can ultimately resort to aggression either in response to frustration or to avoid punishment [...] Fear of Punishment exerts a notable influence in refraining from Prosocial Behavior and in being conducive to Aggression. Probably excessive concern for punishment obstructs consideration for others, disjoins the harm provoked from its possible remedial through restitution and compensation, and further fuels feelings of anguish and distress, which ultimately may end into aggression (2001, 234; 232).

If fear of punishment is indeed more likely to foster aggressive behavior than a morally laudable response, it is clearly counter-effective to resort to threats as a method of improving morals. When these empirical findings about the unexpected side-effects of fear are combined with the statistical data on the comparative law-abiding tendencies among the members of the predominantly religious and non-religious societies, as well as with our ordinary observations about the typical behavior of the avowed theists in comparison to nonbelievers, we may safely conclude that a concern for postmortem punishment plays no significant role in the moral deliberations of most agents.

This brings us to the last point regarding the appropriateness of a religious incentive that appeals primarily to the feeling of fear. Although there is an ongoing disagreement among philosophers and moral psychologists about what should be the proper content of the set of the specifically *moral* emotions, few serious researchers would be willing to include fear on the list. It appears to me that anyone who invokes a threat of divine punishment or the promise of a heavenly reward as a motive for being moral, treats the potential transgressors as immature children, who are unable to understand the real reasons behind the moral regulations. The justification of a normative regulation of the type 'You should not do X because otherwise I will hurt you,' is not a moral justification, since it fails to provide a morally relevant reason for the prohibition in question but rather appeals to pure self-interest. Those crude threats, which might have been appropriate and justified at the earlier stages of the moral development of a child, seem quite out of place among the mature reasoning adults. For instance, if a person finds no better reason for refraining from raping or robbing another except for the fear of God's wrath in the afterlife or that of an inauspicious reincarnation in a future existence, we may agree that such a person is, perhaps, not yet the worst member of a society. But, at the same time, it seems obvious that he or she has not yet progressed beyond the very primitive level of moral understanding.[18]

In the final analysis, an action motivated by fear is always a selfish action, and, as such, should be excluded from the moral domain. When Shafer-Landau stated that "religiously motivated behavior is not morally admirable behavior" he had specifically an appeal to fear in mind (2010, 69). Indeed, the belief that the heavenly rewards and punishments are inevitable destroys the very possibility of authentically altruistic behavior, since the agent *always* stands to benefit, no matter how many apparent sacrifices for the sake of others he might make. Donald

[18] Kohlberg (1969) distinguished six hierarchically structured stages of moral development, where each subsequent stage marks a progress in moral and cognitive growth. It is only at the lowest, 'preconventional' stage that a child explains the validity of rules by reference to the likely sanctions. See (Piaget 1965) for similar findings.

Hubin captures this problem nicely when he observes that "acts of morally laudable, altruistic, *genuine* self-sacrifice are not consistent with the thesis of theism" (2009, 134). Baggett and Walls' rejoinder that "not all self-interest is selfish" and that "proper self-interest is a legitimate part of genuine moral motivation" does not seem to be very helpful, since a proposed distinction between a 'self-interested' and a 'selfish' action will necessarily be *ad hoc* and highly artificial. If one's fear of punishment, combined with a corresponding desire to avoid that punishment, is indeed causally responsible for one's behavioral choices, there is neither the place nor need to appeal to any additional non-selfish motivating factors, and the subsequent attempt to cite an alternative, more respectable explanatory story should be seen as a case of a *post factum* rationalization.

4. The Role of Guilt in Moral Motivation

Given the obvious problems with fear, the feeling of guilt seems like a more promising candidate for the primary trigger of a moral action. Indeed, feeling of guilt has been cited as one of the two emotive prerequisites for a genuinely moral response.[19] In general, guilt results from a realization of violation of the established norms, the causing of unnecessary harm or falling short of expectations, whether those violations and shortcomings be real or merely imaginary. It has also been observed that, unlike fear, shame and anger, that is, the emotions that might often motivate an aggressive response, guilt is a much more docile emotive state with a greater degree of social utility.[20] At the same time, to use Hume's language, guilt is one of the "disagreeable passions" and it is expected that person experiencing guilt would acquire a strong desire to act in such a way so as to diminish the strength of this emotion or to eradicate it altogether. The motivational potential of guilt should thus be taken seriously.

[19] Anger being the second prerequisite, as argued, for instance, by (Prince and Nichols 2010).
[20] See, for example, (Tangley *et al*. 1996) and (Teroni and Bruun 2011).

There might be several ways of dealing with a guilty consciousness, but the most obvious one is to offer suitable reparations to the wronged party. In a typical case, a subjective acknowledgment of one's guilt of the harm done produces a strong reparatory motivation, i.e., a desire to set things right, to improve one's own moral standing or to amend any injury resulting from one's careless actions.[21] Once the Prodigal Son came to the point when he was ready to admit his sin against his father, his immediate desire, fostered by guilt, was to make up for the transgression by contributing to his father's estate "as one of [his] hired servants" (Luke 15:19 KJV). Both common experience and empirical research suggest that such a reaction is by no means unique – a strong desire to compensate for the harm caused can be observed in agents from a very early age.[22] Moreover, guilt is the only emotion that is conceptually connected to the recognition of one's moral responsibility for some wrongdoing. It is also tied to the idea of an agent endowed with free will, who could have acted differently at the moment of choice, and who thus is still capable of making the right choices to rectify the situation. By all indications, guilt is a powerful moral motivator and, a religious apologist might further argue, since adhering to a religion-based, overly-demanding system of ethics would seemingly guarantee an inexhaustible supply of this feeling, nothing could be better for improving morals than instilling religious convictions in the minds of the majority.[23]

That religious beliefs may produce a deep-seated and a thorough guilt-feeling hardly requires an extensive proof. John Hare, for example, contemplating the demands of Christian ethics and our inherent inability to measure up to the requirements, admits that "our own experience is one of continuing and vivid moral failure" (1996, 271). But a continuous preoccupation with one's irremediable moral inadequacy in the eyes of a perfect God may take rather extreme forms and lead to self-abasement and psychological depression, that is, to a

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[21] (Watson and Clark 1992), (Caprara *et al.* 2001) and (Teroni and Bruun 2011).
[22] See also (Piaget 1965).
[23] Almost 75% of all the American respondents agreed that if more citizens were religious, it would significantly improve the moral fabric of society (https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx).

condition that William James aptly characterized as that of a "Sick Mind." As one of the most vivid historical examples of this state, James referred to the spiritual experience of the seventeenth century English religious author John Bunyan, who demonstrated the extremes of a preoccupation with guilt to the point where he despaired of any deliverance and envied the beasts and the birds for not being in danger of going to hellfire after death. After thoroughly examining his actual moral standing as measured against the divine ideal, Bunyan bitterly acknowledged:

> My original and inward pollution - that was my plague and affliction, that I saw at a dreadful rate, always putting forth itself within me; that I had the guilt of, to amazement; by reason of that, I was more loathsome in mine own eyes than was a toad, and I thought I was so in God's eyes too: Sin and corruption, I said, would as naturally bubble out of my heart, as water would bubble out of a fountain: I thought now, that everyone had a better heart than I had; I could have changed heart with anybody; I thought none but the devil himself could equalise me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind (2018, 53-54).

Although the guilt-ridden consciousness described above is relatively rare, the destructive potential of the excessive burden of guilt should not be underestimated. While a realization of failure plays a tangible role in the great majority of ordinary cases in motivating a guilty agent towards a morally commendable reparatory behavior, the same feeling fostered by religious convictions would typically be more intense and thus more devastating in comparison with the cases where one's shortcomings are measured against the merely human standards.

Moreover, as several studies have indicated, there is a straightforward causal connection between guilt and mental anguish, since a typical byproduct of guilt is the fear of punishment.[24] It has also been shown that the relative intensity of the attending fear can be correlated with the

[24] E.g., (Caprara *et al.* 2001).

possibility to rectify the guilt-producing situation by one's subsequent reparatory behavior. If there is nothing that a person can do to set things right, the fear of punishment, often combined with grief and aggressiveness, will predominate to the point that it extinguishes all other socially beneficial motives.[25] Thus, summarizing the results of empirical studies on this feeling, Caprara warns: "The [positive] aspect of guilt should not lead to losing sight of its dysfunctional and maladaptive aspects as attested by its frequent association with other negative emotions such as sadness, hostility and fear, as well as with a variety of psychopathological symptoms related to anxiety and depression" (2001, 222). As Bunyan's case illustrates, these negative aspects of guilt tend to be reinforced when the moral standards one seeks to emulate are beyond human reach, and when the perceived moral offence is committed against a Being with the absolute power to punish the transgressor.

There is one additional problem with employing the religion-induced guilt as a stimulus for moral behavior. In normal cases, our desire to make recompense for the damage incurred is aimed specifically at the victim of our failure or negligence and is in part prompted by a feeling of compassion. If, however, there is no identifiable human agent that can be said to have suffered from our actions, but our failure is of a more abstract kind, such as falling short from God's ideal of righteousness, then it is not clear how much social utility may this specifically religious guilt have. In the context of the Judeo-Christian paradigm, it is implausible to suggest that we can harm God by our actions or benefit Him by offering a suitable reparation. Admittedly, there is some evidence that one might occasionally seek to placate the feeling of guilt produced by a transgression against one party by benefitting a different party, especially in those cases when making amends directly to the offended individual is not an option. In an ingenious experiment, Harris and colleagues set up a donation stand right next to the entrance to a Catholic Church, first targeting parishioners on their way to making a confession, and, afterwards, focusing on

[25] See (Watson and Clark 1992).

those who had just confessed and received absolution from the priest. Remarkably, the persons heading for the sacrament were almost twice as likely to donate to charity than those who had already confessed.[26] In a plausible interpretation, the only relevant difference between the two groups of people was the intensity of a subjective feeling of guilt before a higher power.

The presence of guilt, it seems, may foster a nonspecific desire to make amends and promote altruistic behavior, even if one's reparatory efforts are aimed at unknown persons who were not negatively affected by our actions. It remains unclear, however, how common these reactions are, and whether these pro-social tendencies of the believer's guilty conscience would be statistically significant for the total number of charitable actions motivated by non-religious factors. It must be admitted that the current state of research on emotions does not allow us to draw any definitive conclusions on the overall social value of guilt. At the same time, what we already do know about the likely adverse effects of this self-conscious emotion should make us wary of any attempts to stimulate guilt by means of particular religious convictions.

5. Altruistic Behavior and Gratitude

Unlike fear and guilt, gratitude is a positive emotion, or, to invoke Hume again, "an agreeable passion." Moreover, whereas guilt is a highly precarious feeling, always at risk of either reducing itself to a simple fear of punishment or else, when its intensity grows beyond a certain point, creating a debilitating effect on the agent, gratitude seems to be free from these unfortunate side effects.[27] Gratitude has been praised as the parent of all other virtues by Cicero, listed among the most important Laws of Nature by Thomas Hobbes and esteemed as the prime motivator of benevolent behavior by Adam Smith, while its opposite, ingratitude, was stigmatized as "the

[26] See (Harris *et al*. 1975).

[27] It does not follow that gratitude does not have a dark side of its own. Komter (2004) explores the negative effects of gratitude in the context of dependency and power inequality.

most horrid and unnatural crime" by David Hume.[28] By all indications, the feeling of gratitude should play a significant role in moral behavior.

Jorge Moll and colleagues define gratitude as an emotion that has at least four important components. Gratitude is elicited by (1) detecting a good outcome to oneself which is attributed to (2) the agency of another person, (3) who acted in an intentional manner to achieve the outcome. Finally, (4) gratitude is associated with a feeling of attachment to the other agent and typically promotes the reciprocation of favors (2008, 16). The last component is especially pertinent for our discussion as it relates directly to the issue of moral motivation – a sense of gratitude may motivate a person to act altruistically. Whereas moral actions motivated by fear of punishment or a guilty consciousness may be construed as self-interested actions, it is less likely that behavior stemming from a 'thankful heart' may be presented as selfish. A disposition to reciprocate favors received is not typically coupled with an expectation to receive more favors from the benefactor in the future.[29]

The value of gratitude as an important social virtue that promotes praiseworthy behavior is hardly controversial. The question is whether religious convictions may stimulate a feeling of gratitude in a unique manner, and whether the motivational potential of this emotion can be successfully recruited for the needs of the general moral improvement. Does a believer, in other words, have more reasons to be grateful and does it lead to him being more considerate, generous and sympathetic to others in comparison to a non-believer?

Religion may certainly encourage the virtue of gratefulness in interpersonal relations, but religious exhortations are not essential for developing such a virtue. Indeed, as Bonnie and de Waal have shown, gratitude is not just one of the universals of human civilization, but the rudiments of gratitude can be observed even in the behavior of primates (2004). We do not need

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[28] See (Cicero 1851), (Hobbs 1991), (Smith 1976) and (Hume 2000, 127).

[29] Hume cites gratitude as an example of a "disinterested benevolent affection" (1966, 300).

a specifically religious source to teach us how to be grateful, since it is one of our spontaneous reactions to the reception of undeserved favors from others. One may argue, however, that adhering to certain religious doctrines may supply the believers with additional reasons to feel grateful. For example, according to some religious teachings, those humans who commit themselves to the exclusive worship of a particular God become the recipients of a reward that is both extremely substantial and completely unmerited.[30] Indeed, the Hebrew Bible is replete with references that humans owe gratitude to God for their life, health and sustenance, while the New Testament adds the prize of eternal salvation to the list of underserved gifts. Acknowledging these gifts would surely produce an emotion of gratitude, coupled with a strong desire to do something to match the good will of the divine giver. All that remains, therefore, is to redirect the commendable moral impulse to reciprocate away from the actual giver and in the direction of our fellow humans.

Among the modern apologists, John Hare has specifically emphasized the role of our gratitude to God in bridging the motivational gap between the requirements of morality and our human inadequacy to will the fulfillment of the moral law. While arguing for the general ineffectiveness of the secular forms of moral motivation, he takes it for granted that feeling grateful to God would create a sufficient stimulus for a reciprocal beneficence not toward God (which seems futile) but toward other human beings. Hare captures the condition of reliance on divine help for acquiring the overriding motivation to act morally toward others by means of the term "incorporation into Christ" and illustrates it with several examples:

> The view of incorporation into Christ I have been proposing is that we are incorporated into a common life which we share with him, and the character of this

[30] One should be cautious here of making a sweeping generalization about all religions. Those spiritual traditions that emphasize the importance of personal strenuous efforts in reaching the highest goal, and thus rely little on the "saving grace" of a supernatural power (e.g., Jainism and some forms of Buddhism), will accordingly be less effective in producing the feeling of gratitude toward a god or gods.

> life is itself one of incorporating others. The kind of love we have received from him moves us to give the same kind of love to others [...] Generosity is easier if it comes out of a sense of being ourselves the recipients of God's generosity. The generosity comes from gratitude [...] If we received this sort of forgiveness ourselves (from God and from other people), we can then more easily forgive others in this way (1996, 266-268).

At the heart of Hare's claim is the assumption that God's gratuitous benevolent actions towards us not only provide us with a model of altruistic behavior, but our natural response of gratitude creates a strong desire to benefit someone other than the actual benefactor. A deep sense of gratitude to God for His love and forgiveness enables one to be forgiving, compassionate, charitable and sacrificial towards other humans. It is a natural reaction of grateful reciprocity, according to Hare, that is channeled in the direction of all of God's children and thus positively contributes to the moral climate in a society.

The question remains as to whether these theoretical speculations are corroborated by empirical research. Emmons and McCullough report that experimental findings lead to a conclusion that people focusing on the blessings in their life, and thus experiencing a general sense of gratefulness, "were more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or offered emotional support to another, suggesting prosocial motivation as a consequence of the gratitude induction" (2003, 386). In another study, McCullough and Jo-Ann Tsang argue that current studies generally confirm the hypothesis that people made grateful by the actions of a benefactor are more likely to contribute to the welfare of the benefactor in the future. A feeling of thankfulness functions as both a moral motive and a moral reinforcer, encouraging moral action in a community. Moreover, they add, there is some evidence that the moral motive to reciprocate the favor received may in some cases be redirected "even to a third party," namely, to someone who is not the actual benefactor (McCullogh and Jo-Ann Tsang

2004, 128). Unfortunately, they lament, proof of such a wider application of the moral motive resulting from gratitude is at best indirect, and the current stage of empirical work on this subject simply does not allow us to make any definitive pronouncements.

Even if we grant that a person blessed by an unexpected and undeserved gift is more likely to manifest altruistic behavior towards others, there is no need to single out a sense of gratitude as its unique cause, let alone gratitude towards God. It is a truth bordering on a platitude that positive emotions in general, when experienced by an agent, have an assortment of psychological and interpersonal benefits, including the increased chances of prosocial behavior.[31] But a similar 'prosocial' effect, as argued by Appiah (2008, 41), can be elicited by a variety of other means, including controlling the ambient noise level, allowing a person to find a small coin in the coin-return slot or simply placing an agent in the vicinity of a fragrant bakery. "Being in a good mood" is a much more probable explanation of why a particular person may offer help to the needy in these cases than reference to metaphysical speculation about the abstract duty of being compassionate because God has shown compassion to us. Gratitude, alongside joy, hope, pride and affection, has a measurable effect on moral performance simply in virtue of being closely connected with a desire to share positive psychological experiences with others.[32] Yet, as of now, there are no compelling reasons to maintain that believers who feel especially grateful to a Higher Being are considerably more motivated to 'do the right thing' than those who experience positive emotions fostered by more prosaic triggers.

I feel inclined to conclude that the claim that religious convictions are more effective than any set of secular beliefs in producing the motivating emotions which, in turn, would eventuate into a statistical increase in morally praiseworthy behavior, is false. Fear, guilt and gratitude can be elicited by purely secular conditions, and, in all three cases, a behavioral response to these

[31] See (Fredrickson 2001).
[32] See (Lambert *et al.* 2013).

three emotions caused by ordinary circumstances is more assured, more direct and less convoluted by comparison with a behavioral response caused by religious beliefs. When it comes to moral motivation, an explanatory reference to a person's beliefs about a supernatural agency or afterworld is in most cases superfluous.[33]

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[33] This modest conclusion does not in any way controvert the reality of exceptional individuals, i.e., saints, whose religious convictions are indeed causally responsible for their admirable supererogatory behavior. These rare cases, however, should not be used as a model applicable to majority of ordinary believers. I am greatly indebted to the two anonymous reviewers of the journal for making many valuable suggestions for the improvement of this paper.

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